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DEPT FOR AF/FO -- ASSISTANT SECRETARY FRAZER
DEPT FOR AF/E -- MBEYZEROV

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [OVIP](#) [MA](#) [CN](#)

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR A/S FRAZER'S VISIT TO THE COMOROS

REF: Antananarivo 1251

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Welcome also to Moroni! Your visit to the Union of the Comoros comes as this fragile country faces the latest in a long series of challenges. Your arrival, as the highest ranking U.S. government official ever (we believe) to visit the archipelago, gives you leverage to help steer the country toward stability and peace. The election of President Ahmed Abdallah Sambi in 2006 marked a dramatic change as the first peaceful democratic transfer of power in the country's troubled post-colonial history. Unfortunately, Sambi's ability to pursue his top goal of promoting economic growth has been stymied by rebel warlord Colonel Mohamed Bacar on the island of Anjouan. While the other two islands held peaceful elections last June, Bacar has clung to power in defiance of the Union government, the African Union (AU), and supportive statements from the U.S., France, and others. Your arrival comes mid-way through the 60-day extension of AU sanctions against Bacar and his henchmen. Sambi has appreciated the AU support but, pressured by the Comoran street, is growing impatient to move to military action against Bacar (which almost all observers think would end in failure, if not disaster). You can counsel additional patience, and reaffirm U.S. support for the AU. Any tangible support you can give to Sambi will help him hew to the AU process, but make no mistake - Sambi's political survival ultimately depends on resolving the Anjouan problem. Ref provided a separate scenesetter for Madagascar. END SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION.

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COMOROS - Political
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¶2. (U) Lying midway between Madagascar and Mozambique, the Union of the Comoros stands out among its neighbors in the region as a pro-U.S., Muslim democracy. It is comprised of three semi-autonomous islands whose governments are tenuously subordinate to the Union government. It retains a claim on the fourth Comoran island, Mayotte, which is administered by France. For thirty years after independence in 1975, the Comoros were racked by coups and counter-coups, several led by the notorious French mercenary Bob Denard. In 1997 Anjouan and Moheli attempted to secede from the Union and only returned when a new constitution was agreed to in ¶2001. This constitution stipulated a Union presidency rotating among the three islands. In 2002 President Assoumani Azali of Grande Comore (who had taken power earlier in a coup) was elected president. In 2006 Sambi was one of three candidates - and the leading vote-getter -- selected in Anjouan's primary process. In nationwide voting among these three, Sambi won in a landslide free and fair election. The inauguration of President Sambi in June 2006 marked the first democratic transition of power in Comoran history and an opportunity for the U.S. to increase our engagement in the island nation.

¶3. (SBU) The next step in the Comoros' democratic evolution was to have been elections for individual island leaders in 2007. On Grande Comore and Moheli, these were held on schedule and judged to

have been free and fair. On Anjouan, however, island "president" (read Governor) Bacar - probably sensing that he would lose a free election - refused to allow an impartial process and instead held a sham election in which he "won" 90 per cent of the vote. As a result, while the main trend in the Comoros is toward peaceful, Muslim democracy, recent headlines have been dominated by Colonel Bacar and his intransigence. The AU, which participated in observation of the other two islands' elections, refused to accept Bacar's illegitimate poll and has tried to broker a peaceful and democratic solution to the impasse. However, as Bacar's bad faith has become ever more apparent, the AU has gradually turned to sterner messages to seek compliance, including sanctions that now block travel and financial transfers by a list of persons associated with Bacar. The first 45-day term of these sanctions expired and the AU renewed them for an additional 60 days in late November in the hopes that they may yet persuade Bacar to hold acceptable elections. In the meantime, Sambi is under intense political pressure from the people who ask why, as a "son of Anjouan," he cannot handle Bacar. As a result, Sambi grows more impatient with peaceful pressure and seemingly more eager to move to a military solution. Your public support of the AU process, linked to your support for the Union government, should give Sambi a little breathing room and give the AU a little more time to seek a peaceful resolution. He also needs to hear your voice joining those of France, South Africa, and others in advising him - as Secretary Rice did in a letter sent last summer -- to eschew violence and military action as a means toward resolving the Anjouan crisis.

14. (SBU) Once the Anjouan crisis is resolved, and however it is resolved, most observers agree that the Union and the three island authorities should discuss ways to revise their political compact. Aside from blatant inefficiencies in having three separate bureaucratic structures in such a small and poor entity, the fact of there being an independent militia on Anjouan proves rather dramatically the need to reserve certain competencies, at least, to the Union. Sambi has fully agreed to this, but will do so only with a freely elected representative from Anjouan. The U.S. has a modest USD 50,000 ESF project with the National Democratic Institute (NDI) that could be used to provide technical assistance for the islands in this process.

15. (SBU) The pragmatic GOC is reaching out to deepen its relationships with Western, Arab, and Asian countries alike. Iran is one of those countries who seem to be seeking a special friendship with the Comoros, and has recently provided a fishing boat to the government as a down payment on this relationship. Sambi, while appreciative, has been careful to stress that while he studied theology in Iran at one time, his government does NOT have a special relationship with Iran. China is also active in the Comoros - you will see the Chinese-built (but still vacant) terminal at the airport. Nonetheless, the government of the Comoros has taken considerable steps to show solidarity with the U.S. and they consistently request greater U.S. engagement through development assistance, economic programs, and the return of an American Peace Corps and diplomatic presence. Now more than ever, the U.S. needs peaceful, democratic, Muslim friends like the Comoros. Your timely visit gives senior-level international recognition to the well-intentioned but struggling Union Government. Six months after the first U.S.-Comoran bilateral talks attended by then-Office Director for East African Affairs Eunice Reddick, your announcement of any new initiatives will be warmly welcomed as confirmation that the U.S. stands behind its pledge of deeper partnership.

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COMOROS - Economic
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16. (U) The economic outlook in the Comoros is not bright. With very little industry and few exports (chiefly vanilla, cloves and the perfume essence of ylang-ylang), only remittances from Comorans living abroad (mostly in southern France) - as well as budget support from France -- keep the Comoros afloat. The IMF estimates the Comoran economy will contract by at least one percent of GDP in 2007. Imports are down based on the declining economy, partially caused by the blockages at the main port in Anjouan imposed by Colonel Bacar. Several Arab Gulf nations have proposed significant investment in tourism infrastructure, but the funds have yet to flow. The Union government is engaged in revising its investment

laws, creating a "one-stop" investment shop, and implementing other measures intended to make the country more receptive to foreign investment.

17. (U) Despite fiscal revenue shortfalls, Union spending has increased. The Union Treasury has taken on debt from all possible domestic credit sources, including the Central Bank, savings accounts, and from salaries arrears. Talks with the IMF on a new Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF), at the verge of approval this summer, have been stalled since July due to the ongoing Anjouan crisis. Absent quick resolution of this political impasse, it seems the heavily indebted Union of the Comoros will not benefit from large scale debt relief anytime soon. A meeting earlier this month to seek forgiveness of African Development Bank debt was partially successful, with donors contributing a portion of the target needed to annul the debt. U.S. presence at this meeting was appreciated, but our failure to contribute funds along side France, Britain and other partners was also noted. The Comoros have a tight peg on the French Franc and as such have been able to keep QLO&qinflation in the low single digits.

18. (SBU) The U.S. contribution to Comoran development efforts has been minimal in recent years at best and is only beginning to ramp up. Our military colleagues from CJTF-HOA are active on the island, rehabilitating school furniture and soon to reconstruct several schools on Grande Comore (and hopefully later on Moheli; similar projects identified on Anjouan are on hold). Our military also contributed an English language lab that now is used by both military and civilian students. We are just beginning a distance education program, funded with ESF, for roughly half a million dollars. Our Ambassador's Self Help and Democracy and Human Rights projects give us an entre with civil society in the Comoros. Your announcement of additional ESF funds for micro-enterprise development is likely to be warmly welcomed.

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COMOROS - Security Challenges
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19. (SBU) Probably the most wanted terrorist in Africa, Harun Fazul, is of Comoran origin. An Al Qaeda member and the alleged mastermind of the 1998 bombings at our embassies in Nairobi and Dar, he received his training and indoctrination after leaving the Comoros in search of opportunity abroad. Our Comoran interlocutors are at frequent pains to disavow his radical ideas and insist the Comoran practice of moderate Islam offers no room for extremist ideology. Still, with so few opportunities for education or employment, there is an ongoing concern that other Comoran youth might easily be led astray. The Comoran government, though very limited in capacity, cooperates fully with us in our counterterrorism efforts and in Rewards for Justice.

110. (SBU) The Comoros' miles of unprotected coastline also present a maritime security challenge. Through FMF funds we are in the process of acquiring an "Arch Angel" patrol boat to assist in securing their maritime domain. The President may express appreciation for this assistance, which will not arrive for another year or so (the vessel is under construction in the state of Washington). The most serious maritime issue, however, is outbound migrants from the Comoros seeking to land clandestinely in French-governed Mayotte. The small boats they employ, called kwasa-kwasa, are often not very seaworthy and substantial numbers of Comorans are known to have drowned trying to evade French patrols.

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COMOROS - The People
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111. (SBU) The Comoran people speak a common language and have a common background, but do retain a strong identity to their islands of origin. Almost all are Sunni Muslims, but many are unaware of what the Sunni/Shi'a distinction really means. Living under Karthala, one of the largest and most active volcanoes in the world, those on Grande Comore have learned to live with seismic as well as political upheavals. Although the U.S. Embassy closed in 1995 and the Peace Corps left in 1996, we have found frequent warm memories of the "Americans who spoke Comoran." The Comorans appreciate our very active American Corner, but re-opening the Peace Corps presence

would provide tremendous impact in restoring our people-to-people relations. As you know, Peace Corps Director Tschetter has agreed in principle to reopen early in FY09; PC's feasibility assessment was concluded over a year ago.

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COMOROS - Your Message
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¶12. (SBU) Your presence alone, the most senior USG official ever to visit, will convey that the United States is seriously engaging in and with the Comoros. This has been a sore point since our embassy's closure over a decade ago, and your announcement of a new diplomatic position focused entirely on U.S.-Comoran relations - even if initially based in Antananarivo - will send an important message of engagement. Coming in the wake of the recent launch of the long-awaited USAID distance learning project and the growing CJTF-HOA presence on Grande Comore, any new programs or projects you can announce will add to the new spirit of bilateral engagement. Your support of the elected Union government in its dispute with the island rebels will be deeply appreciated and will give you the stature to speak in support of giving the AU process more time to seek a peaceful resolution of the Anjouan impasse. Privately, it will be important for President Sambhi to hear you reinforce Secretary Rice's advice to resolve their dispute peacefully through

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negotiation, not violence. In addition, coming right after the major Muslim holiday of Eid il-Adha, your warm holiday wishes will send the American message of tolerance and mutual respect that perhaps is important to be heard throughout the Muslim world.

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